

THE DANGER OF BACKSLIDING.*

For Demas hath forsaken me, and embraced this present world.—
2 TIM. IV. 10†

BLESSED St Paul, being now an old man, and ready to sacrifice his dearest blood for the sealing of that truth which he had carefully taught, sets down in this chapter what diverse entertainment he found both from God and man in the preaching of the gospel. As for men, he found they dealt most unfaithfully with him, when he stood most in need of comfort from them. Demas, a man of great note, in the end forsook him. Alexander the coppersmith,—thus it pleaseth God to try his dearest ones with base oppositions of worthless persons,—did him most mischief. Weaker Christians forsook him, &c. But mark the wisdom of God's Spirit in the blessed apostle in regard of his different carriage towards these persons. Demas, because his fault was greater, by reason of the eminency of his profession, him he brands to all posterity, for looking back to Sodom and to the world, after he had put his hand to the plough. Alexander's opposing, because it sprung from extremity of malice towards the profession of godliness, him he curseth: 'The Lord reward him according to his works.' Weaker Christians who failed him from want of some measure of

* 'The Danger of Backsliding' forms No. 10 of 'The Saint's Cordials,' 2d edit., 1637. It had previously appeared in the 1629 edition, under the title of 'Experience Triumphant; or the Saint's Safety,' from 2 Timothy iv. 17, 18. Probably the change of title was owing to other sermons having been published in the interval, under the title 'The Saint's Safety,' for which see Vol. I. pp. 293-334. There was no separate title-page for the 'Danger of Backsliding' in the 2d edition, but that of the first is as follows:—'Experience Triumphant, or, The Saints Safetie. In One Sermon. Wherein is shewed, how the Comfort of Former Experiences of Gods Goodness and Mercy, doe and ought support and stay the soule for the expectation and assurance of Deliuerances and helpe for time to come, &c. Prælucendo Pereo. Vpightnes Hath Boldnes. Psal. 63, 6, 7. When I remember thee vpon my bed, and meditate on thee in the night watches: Because thou hast beene my help, therefore in the shadow of thy wings will I reioyce. London, Printed in the yeare 1629.' It may be proper to state that the present Sermon, from the second edition, is much shorter than in the first, the explanation being that Sibbes had elsewhere, *e. g.*, in 'The Saint's Safety' *supra*, used the omitted portions, and so had wished it to appear in its abbreviated form thereafter; another incidental confirmation of my supposition that the text of the Saint's Cordials of 1637 had received his sanction.—G.

† Misprinted 1 Timothy in second and third editions.—G.

spirit and courage, retaining still a hidden love to the cause of Christ, their names he conceals, with prayer that God would not lay their sin to their charge. But whilst Paul lived in this cold comfort on earth, see what large encouragement had he from heaven! Though all forsook me, yet, says he, 'God did not forsake me, but stood by me, and I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion,' ver. 17.

Obs. In the words we have, 1. This remarkable observation, *that it is the lot of God's dearest children to be oftentimes forsaken of those that have been most near unto them.* Thus it was with Christ himself. His disciples fled and left him, Mat. xxvi. 56. David complaineth that his friends forsook him, Ps. cxix. 87, and xxvii. 10. And Elias mourneth because he was 'left alone, and they sought his life also,' 1 Kings xix. 10.

Reason 1. And God suffers his dearest children to be thus forsaken, that they may be made conformable to their head Christ Jesus, who was left alone of his beloved disciples, and had none to comfort him.

Reason 2. Again, God suffers this to draw them to the fountain, that they might fly to Christ, in whom all true comfort lies, and see whether he is not better than ten sons, as Eli spake to Hannah, 1 Sam. i. 8. The Lord oft embitters other comforts to men that Christ may be sweet to them. Our hearts naturally hang loose from God, and are soon ready to join with the creature. Therefore we should soar much aloft in our meditations, and see the excellencies of Christ, and adhere to him. This will soon take off the soul from resting upon other props. When David began to say, 'My hill is strong,' then presently 'his soul was troubled,' Ps. xxx. 6, *seq.* Out of God there is nothing fit for the soul to stay itself upon; for all outward things are beneath the worth of the soul, and draw it lower than itself. Earthly things, such as are riches, honours, friends, &c., are not given us for stays to rest upon, but for comforts in our way to heaven. Whatever comfort is in the creature the soul will spend quickly, and look still for more; whereas the comfort that we have in God, 'is undefiled, and fadeth not away,' 1 Peter i. 4.

God hath therefore planted the grace of faith in us, that our souls thereby might be carried to himself, and not rely upon vain things, which only are so far good as we do not trust in them. Who would trust to that for comfort, which by very trusting proves uncomfortable to him? If we trust in friends, or estate, more than God, we make them idols.

There is still left in man's nature a desire of pleasure, profit, and whatever the creature presents as good; but the desire of gracious comforts, and heavenly delights is altogether lost, the soul being wholly infected with a contrary taste. Man hath a nature capable of excellency, and desirous of it, and the Spirit of God in and by the word discovers where true excellency is to be had; but corrupt nature leaving God, seeketh it elsewhere in carnal friendship and the like, and so crosseth its own desires, till the Spirit of God discovers where these things are to be had, and so nature is brought to its right frame again, by turning the stream into its right current. Grace and sinful nature have the same general object of comfort, only sinful nature seeks it in broken cisterns, and grace in the fountain. The beginning of our true happiness is from the discovery of true and false objects; so as the soul may clearly see what is best and safest, and then stedfastly rely upon it. For the soul is as that which it relies upon; if on vanity, itself becomes vain; if upon God and Christ, it becomes a spiritual and heavenly soul. It is no small privilege then which the Lord vouchsafeth some, by knocking off their fingers, and crossing their greedy

appetites after earthly comforts, that he may refresh them with pleasures of a higher nature. Alas! what is the delight that we have in friends, or children, and the like, to the joy of God's presence, and the pleasures at his right hand for evermore?

Obs. But to bring the text a little closer to ourselves, the thing that I would have you chiefly to observe is this, *that those that have gone far in religion may yet notwithstanding fall away, and become apostates.*

Reason 1. The reason is, 1. *Because they rest on their own strength, and there is no support in man to uphold himself.* Without Christ we can do nothing. We see how weak the apostles themselves were, till they were endued with strength from above. Peter was blasted with the speech of a damsel. Therefore in all our encounters and fear of falling, we should lift up our hearts to Christ, who hath Spirit enough for us all, and say with good Jehoshaphat, 'Lord, we know not what to do,' but our eyes are towards thee,' 2 Chron. xx. 12. The battle we fight is thine, and the strength whereby we fight must be thine. If thou goest not out with us, we are sure to be foiled. Satan knows that nothing can prevail against Christ, or those that rely upon his power; therefore his study is, how to keep us in ourselves and in the creature; but we must carry this always in our minds, that that which is begun in self-confidence will end in shame.

Reason 2. *Because Satan, that grand apostate, is fallen from the truth himself, and he labours to draw others to fall back with him;* for being a cursed spirit, cast and tumbled down himself from heaven, where he is never to come again, he is full of malice, and labours all that he can to ruin and destroy others, that they may be in the same cursed condition with himself. By his envy and subtlety we were driven out of paradise at the first, and ever since he envies us the paradise of a good conscience. He cannot endure that a creature of meaner rank than himself should enjoy such happiness.

Use. I beseech you, therefore, let us learn that exhortation of the apostle, 'Let him that standeth, take heed lest he fall,' A watchful Christian stands, when careless spirits have many a fall. It is no easy matter to keep our ground. We see tall cedars oftentimes to shake and fall. How many are like buds in a frosty morning, nipped suddenly. We have no more truth of grace than we hold out to the end.

Quest. But how shall we persevere in goodness?

Ans. 1. *Labour for true grace.* What is sincere, is constant. That is true grace which the Spirit of God doth work in us, and is not built on false grounds, as to have respect to this or that man, or by-ends of our own.

Now, that we may have true grace, let us labour to be throughly convinced of sin, after which conviction of our evil ways, grace will follow. To which end we should pray earnestly for the Spirit, which will 'convince us of all sin,' John xvi. 9, and work this grace of constancy, and all other graces in us. For where the Spirit is, there is a savour and relish in all the ways of God. How sweet is the goodness of God in our redemption, justification, and preservation, to a spiritual heart! If there be a relish in the meat, and not in the man, all is nothing.

Ans. 2. Again, if we would hold out, *get a strong resolution against all oppositions,* for, know this, scandals will come, difficulties will arise, but firm resolution will carry us through all. Those that go forth to walk for pleasure, if a storm comes, they return in again presently; whereas he that is to go a journey, though he meets with never so many storms and

tempests, yet he will go through all, because he hath so resolved beforehand. Things are either good or evil, as a man willeth them. The bent of the soul to God makes a man good.

Ans. 3. That thou mayest persevere to the end, *labour, as for the obedience of faith, to believe the truth, so for the obedience of practice.* Labour to know the truth, and to practise what thou knowest, that so thou mayest be built on the rock Christ Jesus. If thou fall, it is thy own fault for building on the sand. Therefore, often put this question to thy soul, Is this truth that I hold? would I die for it? If so, then hold it fast, otherwise suspect there is unsoundness.

Ans. 4. Above all things, *get the love of God in thy heart.* This will constrain us to obedience. If we look altogether upon our discouragements, alas! we shall soon flag and fall away. But if we eye our encouragements, it is impossible we should desert Christ, or his truth. Who would not hold out, having such a captain, and such a cause as we fight for. Where the truth is received in the love of it, there is constancy.

Ans. 5. *Strive to grow daily in a denial of thyself.* None can come to heaven, but he must first strip himself of himself. He must not own his own wit, will, or affections; he must be emptied of himself wholly. He must deny himself in all his aims after the world, in the pleasure, profit, or preferment of it. He must not respect anything if he will follow Christ. A respective religion is never a sound religion. A true Christian hath a single eye; he serves God for himself. A man that hath worldly aims hath a double eye as well as a double heart; such a one cannot but waver. Bring therefore single eyes, hearts, and aims to receive the word. It is the great fault of many; they bring false hearts with them to the ordinances of God. It is said of Israel that he brought Egypt into the wilderness, Num. xi. 18. So it is with most men, they think to have religion and their lusts together; but whatsoever doth begin in hypocrisy will end in apostasy. And know this, that he that hath religion needs not go out for aims or good company. He hath acquaintance with God and Christ, and he hath an eternal inheritance to aim at. There be encouragements enough in religion itself. We need not go out and look abroad for more. I speak this the rather, because false aims and ends is the ready means to undo men, when we have respect to such a man or such a thing in our practice of holiness. Joash was a good king all the while Jehoiada lived. This respect kept him in awe. The eye of a great person keeps some men in, and causeth them oft to blaze forth in a greater show, than many others less outwardly apparent, but more inwardly sincere.

Ans. 6. *Labour, therefore, to have divine truths engrafted in thee;* not to have them loose, for then they will never grow, but get them engrafted in thy heart, that so they may spring forth in thy life, as that which is set in a stock turns the stock into the same nature with it. We should embrace truths inwardly. And indeed God's children will have truths as belonging to themselves. As a wife receiving a letter from her husband, saith, This is sent to me, it belongs to me, so we should say in every truth, this was penned for me, and directed to my soul in particular.

Ans. 7. Lastly, That thou mayest grow deeper in religion, *grow deeper and deeper in humiliation.* Then a man is humble when he accounteth sin his greatest evil and grace his chiefest good. Such a one will hold out in time of trial; and if temptations come on the right hand, of profit or preferment, Oh, saith he, Christ is better to me! And if sin comes on

the left hand, to draw him aside, Oh, saith he, this is the vilest thing in the world; it is the worst of all evils, I may not yield to it.

Obs. But to go on, from Demas his forsaking of Paul, and embracing of the present world, we learn, *that the love of Christ and the world cannot lodge together in one heart.*

Reason 1. The reason is, 1, *They are two masters, ruling by contrary laws.* Christ was resolved to suffer, but the world saith, 'Spare thyself,' Mat. xvi. 22. How can these agree? I deny not but a man may be truly religious, and abound with all outward blessings; but the *love* of the world, and love of religion, cannot harbour in one breast. When the love of the world entered into Judas, it is said the devil entered into him, John xiii. 2. Now, Christ and Satan are contrary one to the other. Where religion is, it carries the soul upwards to heaven and heavenly things; but where the love of the world is, it brings the soul downward to the earth and things below.

Use. *This discovereth the gross hypocrisy of such men as labour to bring God and the world together,* which cannot be. Where the world hath got possession in the heart, it makes us false to God and false to man. It makes us unfaithful in our callings, and false to religion itself. Labour therefore to have the world in its own place, under thy feet; for if we love the world, we shall break with religion, with our friend, with the church, and with God himself. We see how it hindered the man in the Gospel from blessedness. When once Christ told him he must 'sell all that he had, and give to the poor,' he went away sorrowful, 'for he had great possessions,' Mat. xix. 22. Oh how do these things steal the good word out of our hearts, as the birds did the seed that was on the 'highway side,' Mat. xiii. 4. It even chokes the word, as the tares did the corn when it was sprung up, Mat. xiii. 26. Where this worldly love is, there can be no true profession of Christ, let men delude themselves never so much.

Quest. But how shall I know I love the world?

Ans. That will be seen by observing the bent of our heart, how it is swayed towards God and his service, and how towards things below. When two masters are parted, their servants will be known whom they serve, by following their own master. Blessed be God, in these times we enjoy both religion and the world together; but if times of suffering should approach, then it would be known whose servants we are. Consider therefore beforehand what thou wouldst do. If trouble and persecution should arise, wouldst thou stand up for Christ, and set light by liberty, riches, credit, all in comparison of him?

Yet we must know it is not the world simply that draws our heart from God and goodness, but the love of the world. Worldly things are good in themselves, and given to sweeten our passage to heaven. They sweeten the profession of religion, therefore bring not a false report upon the world. It is thy falseness that makes it hurtful, in loving it so much. Use it as a servant all thy days, and not as a master, and thou mayest have comfort therein. It is not the world properly that hurts us, but our setting our hearts upon it; whenas God should be in our thoughts, our spirits are even drunk with the cares below. Thorns will not prick of themselves, but when they are grasped in a man's hand they prick deep. So this world and the things thereof are all good, and were all made of God for the benefit of his creature, did not our immoderate affection make them hurtful, which indeed embitters every sweet unto us. This is the root of

all evil. When once a man's heart is set upon the world, how doth he set light by God, and the peace of his conscience, to attain his ends! How doth he break with God, his truth, religion, and all, to satisfy a lust! And indeed as we fasten our love, so we are either good or bad. We are not as we know, but as we love. If we set our love on earthly things, we ourselves become base and earthly; but if we love heavenly things, our conversations will be spiritual and divine. Our affections are those things which declare what we are. If we do not love religion, it is no matter what we know or talk of it.

He that loves the world, brings it into the church with him. It is chief in his thoughts, and therefore he carries it about with him in his heart wherever he goes. As it is said of Israel, they carried Egypt into the wilderness, so these bring the world to the ordinances of God, they come to the hearing of the word like drones, leaving their stings behind them.

Paul saith not here 'Demas did forsake him' for fear of persecution, but 'for the love of the world.' Faults are in their aggravation as they are in deliberation. Peter denied his Master, but it was not with deliberation, whereas Demas did it in his cold blood. He loved the world, he set up the creature in his heart higher than the Creator.

Use. Labour therefore to know the world, that thou mayest detest it. In religion, the more we know the more we will love; but all the worldly things, the more we know the less we will affect them; as a picture afar off, it will shew well, but come near it and it is not so. Let us see, then, what the world is. Alas! it is but the 'present world,' which will vanish away suddenly. Poor Demas thought a bird in the hand was worth two in the bush, and therefore he would brave it out a while; but, alas! what is become of him now? A worldling oftentimes, in seeking these things, loseth himself and the world too; but a Christian never loseth that which he seeks after, God and Christ, and the things of a better life. The more we know the vanities of the world and the excellencies of grace, the more we will love the one and hate the other.

Labour, then, for faith, that you may overcome the world. It was an excellent speech of Christ when he sent forth his disciples, 'Did you lack anything?' and they said, 'Nothing at all,' Luke xxii. 35. Labour therefore for faith to rely on the promise; for provision, protection, and all things needful. If God be our shepherd, we are sure to lack nothing.

And cherish a waking heart; lay hold of eternal life. The way to get this is not to be drunk of the world, but to be wise, redeeming your time; and balance these earthly things with heavenly. See what these fading comforts are to eternity. All the things we see here are temporal, but the things which are not seen, they are eternal, 2 Cor. iv. 18. Therefore we should let our affections run the right way, and have Abraham's eyes to see afar off, and feed our meditations with the things which we shall have hereafter, as Moses did.

I beseech you, let us prize the favour of God above all that the earth affords. What though we endure hardness here! Did Christ leave heaven to suffer for us, and shall not we suffer some straits for him? Faith can see a greater good in Christ than in the creature. This is that that will set out the vanity of the world and the excellency of heaven, the certainty of the one and the perishing condition of the other. It will make things to come as present with us, and find out a sufficiency in the worst estate.